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Investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching in higher education in China

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While Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a teaching methodology favoured by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), it has not been sufficiently researched to be validated empirically in practice in the EFL classroom (Carless 2009; Cheng and Samuel 2011). Few studies have investigated teachers' responses to TBLT in the Chinese college English context. This research contributes to addressing this gap by investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT and assessing the current implementation of TBLT. A mixed-method methodology was used with quantitative and qualitative data collected via questionnaires and interviews. The findings show that there is potential for the positive implementation of TBLT in the Chinese context. Most of the Chinese ELT teachers surveyed hold positive views on TBLT implementation and report a high frequency of using TBLT. However, this study also reveals that the majority of the participants are not confident in their understanding of TBLT, though but they are willing to undergo training. In addition, the study found that the public examination system is seen as one of the key reasons that impede the implementation of TBLT. The article concludes with a discussion of practical implications of the findings of this small scale-study on how successful implementation of TBLT can be encouraged in the Chinese context.

Keywords: TBLT; Task-based; Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions; TBLT implementation; Chinese Confucian-heritage

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach which developed during the communicative era, focussing on the use of meaningful and purposeful activities to promote language learning (Prabhu 1987; Willis 1996). According to Jeon and Hahn (2006), TBLT provides learners with real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom, which is of great importance for the Asian EFL environment, where learners are limited in their accessibility to English on a daily basis. Butler (2011) and Littlewood (2007) note that a number of Asian countries have been promoting CLT and TBLT in their curricula and English education policies since the 1990s. In particular, Nunan (2003) highlights the importance of TBLT, based on a study of curriculum guidelines and syllabi in the Asia-Pacific countries including Japan, Vietnam, China, Korea and Malaysia. The National English Curriculum standards (NECS) in mainland China, published by the Ministry of Education (MOE), in particular, advocate the use of TBLT (MOE 2001: 2; 2015). According to Zheng (2012: 5), for the first time in Chinese educational history, the NECS has promoted a paradigm shift from a traditional teacher-centred, knowledge-based transmission mode of teaching to a more learner-centred, teacher-facilitated model of teaching. This 'government-mandated TBLT innovation' calls for Chinese English teachers to move from traditional teaching methods to the proposed language teaching method (Hu 2013).

Despite this, however, as discussed below, 'little research has been done to explore what teachers know and believe about these reforms in their specific contexts' (Barnard and Nguyen 2010: 77), especially in the Chinese higher education context (Liu and Xiong 2016). This study explores teachers' perceptions of TBLT in the Chinese college context. The research questions are thus the following:

- (1) Are Chinese college English teachers familiar with TBLT instruction?
- (2) What are the teachers' views on the implementation of TBLT?
- (3) For what practical reasons do Chinese EFL teachers choose to implement TBLT?
- (4) For what reasons do Chinese EFL teachers avoid implementing TBLT?

The study described here is a questionnaire survey, including data collected from teachers in different parts of China, namely Beijing, Tianjin, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Chongqing and Shandong, with 66 participants in all.

Research and practice

TBLT: Theoretical background

'Tasks' came on the language learning scene during the communicative era – their first iteration was in Prabhu's *Second Language Pedagogy* (1987) in which he reported on a language syllabus based purely on practical tasks with no formal language work. The approach evolved into Task Based Learning (Willis 1996) in which it was given an overarching tripartite structure (pre-task, task, language focus), with, importantly, a reinstatement of a dedicated language focus stage. Nevertheless, like Prabhu's original concept, and like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), its underlying principles were the use of meaningful and purposeful communicative activities to promote language learning.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), communicative language teaching is a way of teaching 'communicative competence', that is 'knowing when and how to say what to whom' (121). The aims of teaching changed from fostering the learners' linguistic accuracy to cultivating their communicative competence, which is crucial for real life communication. TBLT is viewed as a development within CLT, as it represents 'a realization of this CLT philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology' (Nunan 2004: 10).

Unlike CLT though, TBLT has a single instructional paradigm: the task. This is in essence a goal-oriented activity, in which learners work towards the achievement of an outcome while communicating in the target language. In terms of how it operates, Ellis points out (2003: 8) that the task involves a 'sleight of hand'; '[tasks] need to convince learners that what matters is the outcome [...] while the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that promote language learning'. As the use of TBLT developed, different ways to implement it emerged. Researchers such as Ellis (2003) and Long (2015a) proposed a 'strong' form and a 'weak' form of TBLT, which are named 'task-based language teaching' and 'task-supported language teaching' respectively by Ellis (2003; 2013). According to Long, task-based language teaching is an approach 'employing task as the unit of analysis at all stages in program design, implementation, and evaluation' (2015a: 3). What Ellis (2013: 5) terms 'task-supported language teaching', on the other hand, has simply incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching. Tasks in the weak version of TBLT are normally used to 'practise items in an overt or covert, pre-set linguistic syllabus of some kind' (Long 2015a: 3). Ellis (2013: 5) also states that in task-supported language teaching the tasks are just used in the 'practice' part of a traditional present-practice-produce (PPP) methodology.

In this study, based on other researchers (for example Ellis 2003; Skehan 1998; Long 1985), the criterial features of a task in TBLT can be summarised as follows:

- Tasks are goal-oriented activities;
- The target language is used for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome;
- Tasks exclude language-free activities;
- Tasks should be authentic and engaging;
- Tasks should be primarily focusing on meaning;

It is easy to understand the benefits of TBLT in the context of the escalation of English language teaching in China. Following globalisation trends, the importance of raising language learners' multicultural awareness and preparing students for effective, interactive communication are essential factors that are emphasised in language teaching and learning. Various research studies have been carried out within the Chinese context to investigate the implementation of TBLT in improving students' communicative competence (Park 2012; Jiang and Sun 2010). According to Park (2012: 238), the findings indicate that the task-based approach is effective and motivating in 'improving the students' communicative competence while not hindering form-focused L2 learning'. Jiang and Sun (2010) also state that a task-based approach encourages learners to do experiments with new language forms and structures.

Despite these obvious benefits, TBLT has also presented a fundamental challenge in the Chinese context. It is important to recognise that TBLT is rooted in early 20th century Western educational philosophy, social constructivism (e.g. Vygotsky 1978). This saw knowledge as 'constructed' by the individual within social contexts. Many of the key descriptors of social constructivism, 'active engagement in processes of meaning making [...] knowledge developed as a consequence of [group] membership' (Au 1998: 297) apply to TBLT. The approach also absorbed shifts in Western pedagogy towards experiential learning in the 1980s (e.g. Kolb 1984) and learner autonomy in the 1990s (e.g. Benson and Voller 1997). This influence can particularly be seen in the way that the teacher is 'side-lined', acting as monitor and advisor during task performance and only returning 'centre-stage' for the language debriefing session that concludes the traditional TBLT cycle.

This student-centred, teacher-facilitated teaching model has been seen as conflicting with the Chinese Confucian-heritage tradition, which emphasises 'hierarchical relations between teachers and students' (Hu 2013: 2). The Chinese Confucian-heritage tradition values the transmission of knowledge rather than questioning, criticising, debating and persuading, so that teachers are the authority and expert in the classroom; students are supposed to receive knowledge from, and respect the wisdom of teachers (Hu 2013: 4; Nisbett 2003; Watkins and Biggs 1996, 2001). But do Chinese students really want to be silent and passive in the classroom? Does the Chinese Confucian-heritage tradition really impede the adopting of TBLT? Littlewood (2000) carried out a study in eight East Asian countries (including China) to examine some common preconceptions about Asian students and their learning attitudes, in particular Asian students' alleged 'obedient' and 'unquestioning' behaviour. The results show that the passive classroom attitude some Asian students have is more likely a result of 'the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, rather than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves' (Littlewood 2000: 34). Iwashita and Li (2012) have carried out a study that investigates the patterns of corrective feedback in a task-based adult EFL classroom setting in China. Despite being

influenced by the impact of large classes and the passive Chinese learning culture, the findings in the study strongly suggest that ‘EFL Chinese students are capable of and willing to respond positively to an alternative mode of classroom methodology, including a task-based approach’ (Iwashita and Li 2012:156). In addition, this study shows that active student participation was enhanced by students’ willingness to accept new methodologies and modes of learning.

Another challenge to the implementation of TBLT is the fact that although many research studies stress the importance of TBLT, there are few genuinely task-based textbooks available (Willis and Willis 2007: 201). ‘This popular and strongly SLA-based methodology has been eschewed by course books’ (Mishan 2013: 273). Hobbs (2011) also states that there is limited availability of ready-made task-based materials and text-books designed to fit TBLT, leading teachers to believe that the only way to implement TBLT is to create their own complete set of teaching materials.

The Chinese educational context

Several aspects of the Chinese tertiary level English education system emerge in this study as important factors associated with the implementation of TBLT; notably, class size and the examination system. English has been recognised as a compulsory school subject in the People’s Republic of China since 2001. The students being taught in College English by the teachers surveyed in this study are first year and second year college students and they have already studied English for about six years in the secondary school. However, due to staffing constraints, the size of language classes at all educational levels tends to be larger and larger. The average number of students in college English classes surpassed 80 in 2005, according to the survey conducted by the National College English Committee (Meng 2009).

In order to assess the fulfilment of the syllabus in China’s college English teaching, a standardised College English Test (CET) system for non-English majors, supported by the National Education Department, has been carried out in Chinese colleges and universities since 1987 (Gu and Liu 2005). CET is mainly composed of multiple-choice questions and the focus is on language forms and grammar (Lei 2012). The CET is regarded as the most influential English test in China and it ‘is now taken by almost every college and university non-English major student in China’ (Jin 2008: 2). Furthermore, the CET has had a far reaching impact not only in academia but also in Chinese society (Pan 2014). For example, the CET certificate (or score) is a well-known credential for employment. In some major cities, it is used as a criterion for application for residence permits (Jin 2008; Pan 2014).

Implementing TBLT in China: The research gap

The National English Curriculum standards (NECS) in mainland China advocates the use of TBLT (MOE 2001; 2015). The NECS encourages English teachers to create authentic English learning situations and contexts, using language teaching approaches and methods that emphasise both processes and products, such as TBLT (MOE 2001). Moreover, the Guidelines on College English Teaching (also known as 2015 Guidelines), the latest document on College English Teaching (CET) reform issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), continues to encourage the adoption of task-based teaching method (MOE 2015). There remains, however, a perceived gap between

policy and practice in the Chinese college context, with a call for continued research to remedy this (e.g. Cheng and Samuel 2011, Carless 2009).

In Asia-Pacific countries in general, there have been a number of research studies on TBLT. Chooma (2013), for instance, investigated the effects of TBLT on enhancing English reading skills for Thai undergraduate students and found that these improved with this methodology. He concluded that the use of task-based learning could motivate students and help them enjoy their learning. Hadi's (2012) study with Iranian female EFL learners on their perceptions of TBLT revealed them to have a high level of understanding of the TBLT concept and positive attitudes toward using tasks in the classroom. Hadi (2012: 103) notes that 'the learners are willing to adapt themselves to this new approach of language teaching' and he encourages EFL teachers to apply TBLT on this basis. However, other studies, such as Jeon and Hahn (2006) researching in the Korean secondary school context, suggest that despite having high levels of understanding about TBLT, teachers retain some fears about it as an instructional method, because of perceived disciplinary problems related to classroom practice.

In the context for this study, China, there has also been research on teachers' understanding and implementation of TBLT at secondary level (Zheng and Borg 2014; Li 2004) and primary level (Deng and Carless 2009). Such research on the whole reveals fairly low levels of understanding of how to implement TBLT, or even knowledge of it. As for studies investigating TBLT at Chinese tertiary level, these appear to focus mainly on writing skills (e.g. Sun 2015; Miao 2014; Cao 2012). The task-based approach has been shown to be effective for writing skills in big classes, encouraging collaborative writing and reducing the stress and load on teachers (Miao 2014), although Miao questions whether teachers have effectively adapted to their new role (monitoring, evaluation etc.) in this instructional method. However, within the Chinese college English context, few studies have investigated teachers' perceptions of TBLT or the application of TBLT: this project, small-scale though it is, contributes to filling this gap in the literature through a mixed-methods study.

Methodology

The participants in the study are EFL teachers for Non-English majors in Chinese universities. Both random sampling and snowball sampling were employed for the distribution of the questionnaire. The online questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was sent by email to over 400 EFL teachers in Chinese universities with only 28 responses; questionnaires were also printed out and distributed by the researchers. First Author¹ went to a university in Hangzhou city and was put in touch with teachers who were interested in participating in the survey. Some of them also passed the questionnaires on to other teachers in other universities. A snowball sampling started and 40 responses were received from this snowball effect. In total, 66 valid responses were obtained. All these responses came from universities in six districts, which are mainly distributed in the north east, east and south parts of China. Obviously, this is a very limited sample given the number of teachers and learners involved in teaching non-English majors but our results should provide a starting point for more in-depth research.

The majority of the questionnaire participants (68%) were female ($n = 45$) and more than half (52%; $n = 34$) are under 40 years old. 20% of the participants ($n = 13$) were over 50 years old with 30% ($n = 19$) are between 40-49 years old. 58% of the questionnaire participants had more than ten years' English teaching experience. Twelve of the questionnaire participants agreed to participate in an interview.¹ Mixed

methods were used in the original research study on which this paper is based (Liu 2015), as the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches were seen as appropriate for the aims of that study. This article focuses primarily on the quantitative data but includes some illustrative samples from the qualitative data.

The design and administration of the questionnaire followed recommendations in Dornyei (2007). It consisted of 16 questions: Qs 1-4 covered participants' background information; (Qs 5-7) focused on teachers' familiarity with TBLT and training in TBLT; (Qs 8-10) on their use of TBLT; and Qs11-15 on the implementation of TBLT. A final question asked if the participants were interested in participating in the interview. The majority of the questions required either a yes-no or a multiple-choice response.

Questions 11 and 13 required participants to tick the reasons they agreed with for, respectively, implementing and not implementing TBLT. These questions were adapted from the questionnaire designed by Jeon and Hahn (2006) as their research, like the present project, focuses on investigating teachers' perceptions of TBLT. We added an extra option to Question 11 ('TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use') and to Question 13 ('TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches'). Participants were also invited to provide details of any other reasons they might have (Qs 12 and 14, respectively), and to give any further comments and reflections on the implementation of TBLT in College English classes (Q15).

Data analysis consisted of quantitative analysis of the closed questions, while the three open-ended questions (Qs 12, 14 and 15) were analysed via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013). As these responses were written in Chinese, these were first translated from Chinese to English by Author 1 and the translation verified by a proficient English speaker at a Chinese university. Thematic analysis is a method for 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data set' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 35). This study used the Braun and Clarke framework (2006) which involves six phases by which the researcher (1) familiarizes him/herself with the data, (2) generates initial codes, (3) searches for themes, (4) reviews themes, (5) defines and names themes, (6) produces the report.

Data analysis

This section presents the findings under themes that resulted from the thematic data analysis as described above. The outcomes from both the quantitative data and qualitative data are compared, combined and discussed in the discussion section.

TBLT: Familiarity and training

In answer to Q5, only 21% of respondents reported that they were 'very familiar' with TBLT. Over 60% were 'a little familiar' or 'not very familiar' and nearly 20% ($n=12$) were not familiar with it at all. Most teachers (around 80%) in this study perceive themselves as having a low level of understanding of TBLT. The twelve participants who said they were 'not familiar with TBLT at all' then only completed Q7, not the subsequent questions on the survey.

Q6 and Q7 investigated the teachers' education and training experience in TBLT. Of the 12 respondents who were 'not familiar with TBLT at all', 75% reported that they would be interested in training. Of the 54 remaining participants, only seven

reported to have had any training in TBLT. When asked to specify the kind of training they had had, two responded that they had learnt about TBLT through self-study, including attending ‘conferences’ and reading ‘articles and books’, and five stated that they had received ‘official training’ in TBLT. In two cases, the training was defined as ‘part of the diploma degree’, specifically Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in their cases.

Implementation of TBLT

In response to Q8 (have you ever used TBLT in your teaching?), 44 of the 54 participants (81%) said they had used TBLT in their teaching and 41 said they were still using TBLT (Q10). The remaining 10 participants said they had never used it. Q9 asked about estimated frequency of use, and results are shown in Figure 1. The majority of teachers (89% or 39) reported using TBLT at least once in every 10 lessons.

Figure 1. Responses to Q9 ‘Approximately, how often do you use TBLT?’

Qs 11-15 focused on the reasons why teachers chose to implement TBLT or not, and included both closed (Qs 11 and 13) and open questions (Qs 12, 14 and 15). Table 1 presents the responses to Q 11 (why implement TBLT). Participants could select as many options as were relevant to them, and the most selected options were: ‘TBLT creates a collaborative learning environment’ (81.82%) and ‘improves learners’ interactive skills’ (79.55%). More than 65% responded that TBLT activates learners’ needs and interests and fosters learner autonomy.

Table 1. Reasons for implementing TBLT (responses to Q11)

Table 2 presents the responses to Q13 (why avoid implementing TBLT). ‘Materials in textbooks are not suitable for using TBLT’ and ‘large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods’ are the top two most selected reasons. The third most selected reason (around 31% of the total) is that teachers have little knowledge of task-based instruction while 30% believe that ‘students are not used to task-based learning’.

Table 2. Reasons for avoiding TBLT (responses to Q13)

22 participants answered the open questions in total with 29 separate answers. These answers were coded using thematic analysis as described above. The themes and codes generated are presented in two thematic maps presented in Figure 2, the advantages and opportunities for implementing TBLT and Figure 3, challenges to implementing TBLT.

Figure 2. The advantages and opportunities for implementing TBLT

Figure 3. Challenging factors for implementing TBLT

These issues will be explored in more detail below.

Discussion

Q1. Are Chinese college EFL teachers familiar with TBLT?

Most teachers (around 80% of the participants) self-report as having a low level of understanding of TBLT. Limited knowledge of TBLT makes it very difficult for teachers to implement TBLT. Unsurprisingly, this is one of the most frequently selected reasons that teachers give for avoiding using TBLT. Six of the 12 interview respondents stated that they were quite familiar with TBLT, but still not very confident about TBLT pedagogy, especially in terms of the theoretical backgrounds and development of TBLT. As one respondent put it:

When I was doing my Bachelor's degree, we had this course called Language Teaching Pedagogy. I heard about TBLT back then. But I focused on the literature and culture aspects when I was doing my master's degree and I didn't have any courses on teaching pedagogy. So I don't think I know much about the theoretical aspect... I bought books that focused on the theoretical knowledge of TBLT to self-educate myself, like, the book written by Rod Ellis (2003). (Interview Respondent 2)

This echoes the concern of Nunan (2003), who argues that principles of TBLT begin to appear in commercial textbooks aimed at the public school sector in places such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, but teachers themselves have a poor understanding of TBLT. He concludes that whether they are capable of using these textbooks effectively is still open to question. Nevertheless, our data do suggest that teachers are open to undergoing training; 75% of those who said they had very little familiarity with TBLT said they were willing to get training.

Q2. What are teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of TBLT?

Most teachers in this study say they have used TBLT in their teaching and of those, nearly all of them (93.18%) say they will continue to use TBLT. The frequency with which they say they use TBLT is quite high. This suggests that in general these Chinese EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards practising TBLT despite their comparatively low-level of understanding, and that they are willing to try it out.

Additionally, two participants' comments in the qualitative data (Qs 12, 14, and Q 15) express this well, with one commenting 'I think TBLT is an effective method to learn English' while another stated that 'TBLT is one of the most effective approaches to FLT [foreign language teaching] although it requires much preparation by and English proficiency of the instructor'.

Q3. For what practical reasons do teachers choose to implement TBLT?

The main reason teachers appear to be positively oriented to TBLT is because of its collaborative and interactional nature and its motivational potential (see Table 1). Almost 82% of the participants in this study said that they were using TBLT because it creates a collaborative learning environment. Peer-interaction is of great value for CLT and TBLT has typically based itself on group/pair work (Willis 1996; Skehan 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the majority of the Chinese ELT teachers in this study recognise the collaborative potential of the method.

'TBLT improves learners' interactive skills' was the second most selected (almost 80%) reason that teachers report choosing to use TBLT. These Chinese EFL teachers clearly perceive TBLT as helping to promote students' communicative competence. This is also evident in the open-ended question where one participant

commented: 'It gives [the students] opportunity to practise comprehensive linguistic abilities such as listening, speaking and writing, etc. Equipping students with the ability to deal with real tasks in life'.

Nearly 66% of the participants also said they choose to use TBLT because it promotes students' motivation, initiative and learning interest (see Table 1). One interview respondent shed light on this, stating that the traditional teaching approach is 'boring' in class, and that they sometimes use TBLT to alleviate this; they think TBLT can promote the students' interest and motivation to get involved in class.

Sometimes I use TBLT to lift the atmosphere and generate interest. So they could feel that English learning is actually very interesting. It could remedy a pitfall of the traditional teaching approach' (Interview Respondent 8).

It is widely accepted that student motivation is one of the most important factors for language success (e.g. Dornyei 2001; Gardner 2000). The goal-oriented nature of tasks provides the motivation for students to engage in the task, which then becomes a learning opportunity for them (Willis 1996: 28).

Interestingly, the option that TBLT promotes learners' academic progress was the least selected reason for using TBLT (only around 36%). This response is no doubt related to fact that the examination system in China for English language learning, such as the College English Test (CET) band 4 and 6, is still form-focused, focusing on vocabulary, grammar and language forms. This test cannot evaluate the level or improvement of students' communicative competence on which TBLT mainly focuses.

Q4. For what reasons do teachers avoid implementing TBLT?

The major factors hampering the implementation of TBLT are discussed in terms of the following aspects shown in Figure 3: resource constraints, constraints from administrative systems, constraints of students and constraints of teachers.

Resource constraints

These are of three types relating to the implementation of TBLT in the Chinese context; course books, class size and the English speaking environment. As shown in Table 2, 'Materials in textbooks are not suitable for using TBLT' and 'large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods' are the top two most selected reasons. Three comments were also given by participants regarding teaching materials being an impeding factor; as one participant commented, 'sometimes, materials in textbooks are not appropriate for using TBLT'. Interview respondents also identified the limitations of the textbook(s) they were using: 'there is limited design for oral speaking and the topics are irrelevant to the students' life' (Interview Respondent 10), and 'the topics are quite out of date' (Interview Respondent 12). It is important to note that these comments are not only found in research on the Chinese context. Although many research studies stress the importance of TBLT, 'this popular and strongly SLA-based methodology has been eschewed by course books' (Mishan 2013: 273). Hobbs (2011) states that there is limited availability of ready-made task-based materials and text books designed to fit TBLT, leading teachers to believe that the only way to implement TBLT is to create their own complete set of teaching materials.

As shown in Table 2, another frequently selected reason for not implementing TBLT is large class size, second only to the lack of teaching materials mentioned above.

TBLT has typically based itself on group/pair work (Willis 1996; Skehan 1998). However, carrying out group/pair work in the large classes can pose management problems and can be physically and mentally challenging for teachers. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to see that more than 50% of the participants believe that large class size is an obstacle to the use of task-based methods.

One participant commented that TBLT was difficult to implement because ‘we don’t have the real and native English speaking environment to strengthen the learning’. This reason may relate more to that individual teacher’s lack of familiarity and confidence with TBLT as their comment could be seen as a strong reason for promoting TBLT. Indeed, Ellis (2013) argues that TBLT might be better suited to foreign language (FL) contexts than second language (SL) contexts. He explains that in the FL context (e.g., many Asian countries, such as China) ‘where communicative opportunities outside the classroom are limited, there is an obvious need to provide such opportunities inside the classroom; TBLT is a means for achieving this’ (Ellis 2003: 18). For countries like China, TBLT may help create more communicative speaking environments. Indeed, as Mishan and Timmis (2015: 35) have noted: ‘statistically, English is spoken most commonly among non-native speakers’. English is used as a foreign language in China and opportunities for most Chinese students to communicate with native English speakers are limited. Most Chinese English learners will go on to use English in an international context rather than in a predominantly native-speaking environment.

Constraints from administrative systems

The public examination system emerges as one of the key reasons that impede the implementation of TBLT. Several teachers ($n=5$) comment on the examination system especially the CET test, which conflicts with the implementation of TBLT in class: for example, ‘the examination system in China forces the teachers and students to focus on the exams like CET4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET6, thus impeding the usage of TBLT’. As discussed earlier, the CET test has had a significant impact on students’ educational and social development in China (Li, Zhong and Suen 2012: 79). Teachers are under great pressure to help students to pass the form-focused exam which is in conflict with the focus of TBLT. This finding echoes Ma’s (2014) statement that ‘out of utilitarianism, both universities and students favour the short-term benefits and are reluctant to concentrate on training of communicative competence’ (1176).

Perhaps as a result of this, there is limited opportunity for teachers to develop their teaching skills and the only way that seems accessible for most teachers to do this is self-learning. More than 87% of the participants said that they had never had any in-service training in TBLT. It is thus not surprising to see that almost 32% of the participants think that their limited understanding of task-based instruction impedes the implementation of TBLT and a number of respondents stressed that there should be some in-service training in TBLT. This finding provides further support for Nunan’s (2003) statement that a major problem in Chinese teacher education is the lack of adequate and appropriate teaching training. The limited teaching hours and the pressure to fulfil the form-focused teaching curriculum are also highlighted as issues that challenge implementation of TBLT. It is clear that teaching institutes on their side are not implementing any changes to the teaching curriculum to enable the implementation of this innovative teaching approach.

Under the centralised education system, unified teaching materials, aims and objectives and evaluation form are mandatory for all teachers and students. The

majority of Chinese college students have to focus on the CET test. However, teachers in this study state that this kind of ‘one size fits all’ teaching system is not working well, because it neglects the students’ different learning needs and motivations. As an example, one participant comments ‘Actually I think the aims of Chinese college English teaching are not clear, and then some teachers and students are lost under such circumstances’. According to Long (2015b: 325) unlike most other teaching approaches, TBLT is radically learner-centred as ‘the course content is determined by students’ needs’. Therefore, in order to facilitate the implementation of TBLT, students’ different learning needs and motivations need to be evaluated in Chinese language teaching classrooms.

Constraints of students

A particularly strong element of washback from the Chinese examination system is that teachers perceive their students as being solely extrinsically motivated. This comes across in a number of comments in the questionnaires ($n=8$) which indicate that student motivation for English learning affects the implementation of TBLT. As one participant put it: ‘Chinese students learn English mostly for passing kinds of examinations and get certificates. So they are not so interested in learning English. If you design some activities in class, it seems that it has nothing to do with them’.

In addition, students’ understanding of the rationale of TBLT emerged as a constraint according to teachers in this study. Making sure that students understand the advantages of the techniques used in TBLT and that they were interested in them is very important for the implementation of the new methodology (Iwashita and Li 2012): ‘students’ cooperation and their learning motivation are key to the success of TBLT’, noted one participant. However, another mentions that ‘students don’t know how to finish tasks well’. This links with the finding that nearly 30% of the participants think that students are not used to TBLT. According to some respondents, students show little creativity and flexibility in learning, which affects their participation in tasks. This could be attributed to the teacher-centred educational environment; the students ‘get used to listening to the teacher passively’, as one respondent notes. This supports the suggestion that in countries where teacher-fronted classes are the norm, students may need some time to adjust to TBLT’s interactive approach (Hadi 2012:103) We should remember Littlewood’s (2007: 34) comments that such passive classroom attitudes are likely the result of the educational context and that Asian students are not inherently passive learners. Research studies in various countries in Asia have shown that ‘students demonstrate acceptance of and preference for TBLT over traditional teaching method’ despite negative feelings towards TBLT at the beginning (Lai 2015: 19). Adams and Newton (2009: 9) conclude that ‘once exposed to task-based teaching, Asian learners can adjust their preferences for learning’.

Constraints of teachers

32% of teachers reported that a reason they avoid using TBLT is that they feel they have little knowledge of task-based instruction and don’t have the competence to implement it: as one of the interview respondents commented, ‘It also depends on whether the teacher has the competence to use TBLT. I think if the teacher has no confidence to control the TBLT class, it would be safer to use the traditional teaching approach’ (Interview Respondent 12). This finding provides further support for Butler’s (2011) statement that non-native English-speaking ELT teachers often do not feel

confident of their sociocultural and strategic competence when introducing communicative activities in class or assessing students' communicative competence.

Since there is not enough appropriate teaching material for TBLT, teachers feel they may have to design tasks by themselves. Two participants in the questionnaire stated that it is challenging to design tasks that are interesting and helpful. Apart from task design, task assessment is the other challenge for Chinese ELT teachers, as one participant noted: 'many difficulties will be confronted (in tasks) assessment'. Almost 26% of the participants state that they had difficulty in assessing learners' task-based performance, which is also the reason they avoid using TBLT.

Conclusions and implications

The majority of the Chinese EFL teachers surveyed in this study appeared to hold positive views towards, and stress various advantages of, the implementation of TBLT in their context. Given this potential, this section discusses how TBLT might be successfully implemented in the Chinese context.

As a first step, more surveys and investigations on teachers' perspectives should be carried out and analysed before any policy can be made. This was part of the rationale for this study, but our survey was necessarily limited by the relatively small numbers involved. The literature on curriculum innovation and implementation suggests that 'teachers' perspectives are widely recognised as the most critical in the realization of any curricular innovation' (Graves and Shoen 2006: 3). Given the teacher's central role in how curricular elements are put into practice, there is a need for systematic investigation of teachers' perspectives and attitudes before any policy can be made.

A particular priority area would be to review the assessment system overall. The students' test-focused learning motivation and the test-oriented teaching are all consequences of the exam-focused evaluation system. In the Chinese context, it is unlikely that a purely task-based assessment system could be implemented, but it may be feasible to incorporate a task-based in-class performance assessment into the national examination system. In this case, teachers would be empowered to take a more accountable role in the assessing system, rather than following the national public examination system (Inbar-Lourie 2005). This would help bridge the gap between the top-down education system and local autonomy.

Thirdly, a more practical and efficient in-service teacher training programme should be developed. There is a need for most Chinese EFL teachers to further develop their professional skills in terms of their English proficiency, sociocultural and strategic competence, teaching methodologies and so on. The findings of this study also show that Chinese students are not passive learners (Littlewood 2007; Lai 2015), but their limited understanding of TBLT, the passive learning environment and the exam-focused learning caused by the evaluation system impede their active participation and cooperation in task-based learning. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to explain clearly the rationale of TBLT before implementing TBLT.

While it is not possible to generalise on the basis of this small-scale study, the findings nevertheless provide some insight into the issues raised by the implementation of TBLT in the Chinese higher education context. It is hoped that they will inspire practitioners to explore TBLT with greater confidence and encourage researchers and curriculum designers to investigate more fully the views of those who are key to successful classroom implementation - the teachers themselves - and to base programmes for teacher development on these insights.

Notes

1. Detailed analysis of all interview data is submitted as another article by the first-named author of this article.

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